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# John Fetzer

By LORAN PRINE

John Earl Fetzer came to Kalamazoo 35 years ago during the dark days of the depression.

He and his wife had \$125, a couple of hand built microphones and a hand built transmitter. On this early base was built the Fetzer broadcast empire.

Fetzer's twin loves, broadcasting and baseball — he owns the Detroit Tigers and nine radio and television outlets — go back to his boyhood in Lafayette, Indiana. There, a former brother-in-law who was a Wabash Railroad dispatcher, Tiger fan and amateur wireless operator gave an early start to Fetzer's interests.

From the brother-in-law, Fetzer learned Morse Code and much about early radio. The old Wabash railroaders, according to Fetzer, were avid Tiger fans, and some telegraph operators "kept the wires hot giving the play-by-play on Tiger games in Detroit."

The other great influence in Fetzer's life came from his mother, who encouraged him to finish high school in West Lafayette (where he dug ditches for \$1 a day) and to get started in the Electrical Engineering School at Purdue University, where he only took courses in radio communication.

Fetzer's father died in 1903 when the boy was two years old. His mother supported the family by opening a hat shop in Decatur, Indiana. The family later moved to Frankfort, Indiana, then to Lafayette.

His mother remarried when Fetzer was a teenager, and, through this marriage to Irvin I. Pyle, he became related to Ernie Pyle, the writer and famed World War II war correspondent.

Curiosity about his own unknown family background led Fetzer to study its genealogy. In 1964, a 212-page history of the family was published. Fetzer handled both research and writing in tracing the family back to the mid-16th century German states. Wrote Fetzer about his name: "While I have always appreciated receiving

the name John for my father, I was never able to ascertain the reason for the middle name of Earl. It never had been used in our family, either on the paternal or maternal side. I would have appreciated very much receiving Winger as a middle name, since it was my mother's family name."

While at Purdue, Fetzer was a ham radio operator and part-time radioman at the school's station 9FD, one of the first to be licensed by the government. As early as 1918, he had talked on his own "wireless telephone" from Lafayette to Great Lakes, Illinois.

Fetzer had yet to enter Purdue when a ham station in Pittsburgh broadcast the Warren G. Harding, James M. Cox election returns in 1920. This was the first American commercial radio broadcast, and the ham station became the nation's first commercial station, KDKA.

Radio then started to grow across the country, and anyone who knew how to build broadcasting equipment was suddenly in demand.

"In those days," Fetzer notes, "the engineer built the station from the ground up, making parts as he went along. The only parts that we could buy were vacuum tubes." After building several stations, the last of which was WCFL ("The Voice of Labor in Chicago"). Fetzer had earned the reputation of being a topflight technical consultant.

In the 1920's, the federal government was concerned about regulation of radio broadcasting: congressmen didn't know whether to take radio under government ownership or let it stay under the free enterprise system.

Fetzer paid his own way to Europe in 1925 to study government-owned radio systems in England, Holland, Germany, Switzerland and France. His findings were published in U. S. newspapers and in national magazines and showed it would be better to give listeners what they want rather than what the government wants the public to hear.

His chief point in the report was the fact that "In Europe generally there is some philosophical thinking behind their systems. Their governments appear to believe that the thinking of the people should be controlled. They don't believe in the democratic process. And of course, this is not in keeping with the American concept," Fetzer says.

After publication of the Fetzer report, the federal government left radio in private hands, but never has given broadcasting the same freedom as it guarantees newspapers and periodicals through the U. S. Constitution.

"That was the easy part," says Fetzer. "The hard nut to crack was the economics of private ownership. The effort by private ownership led to sponsorships, and this developed into the direct advertising we know today. Direct advertising, you see, is one of the prime forces in the mass media today."

The next year, 1926, was a big year and a turning point in Fetzer's life. He was called on to build a small radio station (WEMC) at Emmanuel Missionary College (later Andrews University) in Berrien Springs. "They couldn't find anyone to run the station after it was built, so they asked me to stay and run it," he says. Fetzer hadn't completed his degree at Purdue, so he entered a degree program at the school.

He married Rhea Yeager in 1926, the year she graduated from the Berrien Springs college. Fetzer earned his bachelor's degree there the next year, although he did graduate from the National Radio Institute in Washington, D. C. during 1926. In 1929, he did graduate work at the University of Michigan and took extension courses from the University of Wisconsin in 1930. He received an honorary LL.D. from Western Michigan University in 1958.

Emmanuel Missionary College, after depression hit, couldn't afford to pay Fetzer, and maintain WEMC, so in 1930 he took over the station "on credit."

Kalamazoo was the only major Michigan city without a commercial radio station, so

he applied to the Federal Radio Commission to move the station from Berrien Springs and close its South Bend and Benton Harbor studios.

The commission approved the move to Kalamazoo, the new call letters WKZO and a broadcast frequency of 590 kilocycles. Power was rated at 500 watts and the station could broadcast only during the day.

So the Fetzers came to Kalamazoo with their total savings of \$125, a hand made transmitter and hand built microphones to put WKZO on the air. They arranged with the Burdick Hotel to swap air-time for two rooms on the seventh floor, lived in one and converted the other to a studio. They also bartered for parts and building materials to construct a house-like transmitter building on Nichols Road about 500 feet south of Alamo Road. The building still is in use — now as a residence.

"I wouldn't say we traded time for groceries, but we did have a reciprocal agreement with some local suppliers. It was mostly for building materials," Fetzer notes.

There was no money during the depression to hire help, so Fetzer sold spot announcements, wrote copy, announced and handled engineering. But advertising revenue was hard to get.

"In those early days, the very idea of advertising by radio was so new to the average businessman that he had no faith or confidence in it. I had to show them that it was an effective advertising medium, and I knew I could because local retailers were selling radio sets like mad.

"So I took a little North Burdick Street grocery store — and it was little, barely a hole in the wall — and extended the owner unlimited credit. He didn't have to pay for the advertising unless he got results.

"His merchandise was advertised exclusively on WKZO — nowhere else. Soon he had to knock out his back partition to make the store longer. Next, he had to widen the store by putting an archway into a vacant building next door and expand into that building, too. He grew more than four times and became a supermarket. But that was in the early days — before supermarkets really started.

"This example was used to break into the advertising market in Kalamazoo, and it was one of the first success stories in the entire country — we had only daytime operations then, too.

"But, if I had had to depend on local support for the station, I'd have never made it. But people on the broad national base have an overview that is not available here. But here is where I got my start."

Fetzer's station grew during the Depression, and he hired personnel. "All those who were with me during tough times went on to make something of themselves," he says. Among them were these notables: Allan Jackson, now with CBS news; Paul (Orndt) Harvey and Bill Shadell.

"The struggle (to build the station) was almost insuperable; there is no real reason

for my success outside of my own determination," Fetzer recalls.

"No banking institution would lend me five cents, but I hold no grudges. Nor do I have any feelings about not being greeted with open arms in Kalamazoo. I'd do the same thing myself if some young man came in here with an idea for a new, untried business."

Since 1947, Fetzer has been a member of the board of directors of the American National Bank and Trust Company of Kalamazoo. And, although the Kalamazoo Chamber of Commerce greeted him "patronizingly" when he started WKZO, he was a long-time member of the chamber's board of directors and is a past president of the group.

"I saw early in life that our world is a world of survival of the fittest—and I made up my mind that I would survive."

WKZO was an independent station during the early 1930's, joining the Michigan Radio Network in 1934. This affiliation made WKZO a key station in the state-wide network. The other two larger stations were WXYZ in Detroit and WJIM in Lansing. MRN gave Kalamazoo the Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet and Detroit Tiger baseball. WKZO gave the state several programs including one soap opera that had Mrs. Fetzer in a principal role.

By 1937, WKZO's power was boosted

from 500 watts to 1,000 watts through the day and the station came into its own. By picking a low frequency (590kc) Fetzer's transmitter could cover a wide area. Other stations that were on the air before WKZO were WOOD in Grand Rapids and WELI in Battle Creek. Both operated at high frequency and gave a strong, but short range local signal. Broadcasters in the early days of radio were more interested in local strength — and high frequency antennas are easier to build. The higher-powered, low frequency WKZO was covering such distances that when Fetzer wanted to increase the power to 5,000 watts and start night broadcasting he was sued by WOW in Omaha, Nebraska, which said Fetzer's night programming would blast theirs (also on 590kc) off the air.

The suit was in and out of the U. S. Supreme Court twice and lasted seven years, with the final decision allowing both stations to use the frequency and power through the daytime. WKZO, however, would have to go into directional broadcasting at night.

WOW had wanted WKZO eliminated from night broadcasting. So, Fetzer designed and built a sophisticated directional antenna for the station. All earlier attempts at directional broadcasting had met with only partial success.

As a result of the suit, the directional an-



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tenna became part of the procedure for Federal Communication Commission licensing, and it "paved the way for licensing more than 3,000 new radio stations in the country," Fetzer says.

About the time WOW and WKZO were battling in court, the Kalamazoo station joined the CBS network. This affiliation temporarily ended broadcasts of the Detroit Tigers games, and Kalamazoo listeners had to turn to WELL in Battle Creek for the games.

During World War II, Fetzer was U. S. Censor of Radio, supervising security on the four major radio networks, some 900 domestic radio stations and 26 short-wave stations overseas.

In his job as censor, he was one of the few persons who knew about invasion plans for Europe — D-Day.

Fetzer traveled to Europe in 1945 at the invitation of General Eisenhower to study radio communications problems after the war. While there, he heard powerful Radio Berlin after it had been seized by the Russians.

"I heard them say that it was the Russians who were bringing food into Germany and that Russian democracy would be for all the people, not just a few as it was in Britain and America. These were both outright lies and I told General Eisenhower about it.

"Those SOB's," he said, "I'll occupy it [Radio Berlin] tomorrow." Radio Berlin, you see, had studios in the U. S. sector and

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transmitter in the French sector. But the propaganda problem was turned over to the state department and they negotiated for seven long years about the broadcasts.

"Then the French blew up the tower, and, after it fell, the Russians had the station back on the air in about 20 minutes — so they had already been moving the station when the French blew up the tower. It was a very touchy situation for a long time. The Russians used the station as the major propaganda source in central Europe for years."

Later, Fetzer was twice asked to become an ambassador, but turned down the honor both times.

He built radio station WJEF in Grand Rapids in 1945, and, in 1961, built the world's most powerful FM station there.

In 1950, WKZO Television started operating, but only for a few hours each evening with no Kalamazoo studio productions. All films, slides and network programming was handled right at the transmitter with network programming being piped from Chelsea to Albion and then to the WKZO transmitter. Detroit and Toledo stations were picked up off the air and relayed through WKZO.

Trouble was frequent, and on cloudy days the television picture would be very faint. Once WKZO was carrying a Detroit Lions game from the West coast. The network relay transmitter in Albion was operated by a time clock and no one at WKZO remembered to go to Albion to set the clock ahead to match West coast time. So, in the third quarter, the transmitter shut off the Detroit Lions . . . period.

In 1952, Fetzer was named the first chairman of the Television Code Review Board of the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters. This board is in charge of self-regulation of the TV industry. The same year, he was a foreign correspondent for the radio, TV and newspaper editors' mission to Europe and the Middle East. He had covered the same ground as a correspondent in 1945.

In 1960, Fetzer became president of the Detroit Tigers after getting two-thirds control of the club. He had headed an 11-man syndicate that bought the Tigers from the W. O. Briggs estate for \$5,500,000 in 1956. A little over a year after becoming president of the club Fetzer bought up the remaining third of the shares to give the Tigers their first one man ownership since Briggs' death in 1952.

Fetzer is a member of the board of directors of the American League and is chairman of the league's radio-television committee. He is also a member of baseball's executive council, the controlling body for the professional sport.

Fetzer once said that baseball takes more of his time than all of his other enterprises. How does he keep track of the others?

"I'm active in all of them and I know what's going on. I have a chain of command and each top executive is directly responsible to me. Most send a written report to

me that is carefully scrutinized. However, each corporation is autonomous and must fit into its community."

All Fetzer executives are trained near Fetzer himself before being sent to one of the corporations. "Our people learn early in life that to be successful you must associate with a successful man," he says.

Since 1953, he has been president and owner of Cornhusker Television Corporation, with stations in Lincoln and Grand Island, Nebraska. He also owns radio-TV stations in Cadillac and Sault Ste. Marie besides the radio and television outlets in Kalamazoo and radio stations in Grand Rapids.

Fetzer employs "about 100" persons at WKZO and "at least 1,000" in Detroit's Tiger stadium during the baseball season. Without a check of the records, he isn't sure just how many total employees he does have, however. What is the value of all his holdings? Says Fetzer: "Well, everything included, they're worth many, many, many millions of dollars."

The latest local Fetzer undertaking is cable television, and "it's going to take about 200 miles of cable to wire up Kalamazoo. You know, there hasn't been a time in the last 35 years that we haven't been building. And, I don't know of any city this size that has an institution like WKZO."



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